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FEATURES

BOOKS FOR SPRING *Edited by William Goldstein* 317
Compiled by Maureen J. O'Brien, Beth Levine, Laurie Goodman
Spring Hardcovers 318
Trade Paperbacks 347
Mass Market Paperbacks 368

DEPARTMENTS

NEWS OF THE WEEK .. 312
AAP Board Votes to Reject South Africa Book Boycott
Galassi Is Editor-in-Chief at FS & G, Strachan Is Associate Publisher
NBCC Ethics Survey
Payment Nears in Macmillan Sex-Bias Settlement
Viking and Matthiessen Prevail in Libel Suit
Senate Bill Favors Adherence to Berne
Cross Currents
Fruehling Moves to Maxwell
Murdoch Raises Stake in Pearson
Obituary Notes: Leon Seltzer

TRADE NEWS 375
More Books for Spring

CHILDREN'S BOOK SCENE 395
Arnold Lobel Remembered

BOOKSELLING 400
A New Look at Computer Books
Sunny Contest Roundup
Sales and Distribution

AUDIO/VIDEO PLUS 403
Audio Partners to Market Newman Communications Catalogue: Old contracts, new productions take precedence for February launch
Audio Preview:
Big Books, Big Tapes: This season's audio lists look like hardcover bestseller lists—past, present and future

PW INTERVIEWS 411
Rosamunde Pilcher

FORECASTS 413
Fiction 413
Nonfiction 418
Paperbacks 425
Children's Books 428

COLUMNS

Highlights 309
Letters 310
Media 310
Calendar 310
Rights 393
Religious Books 394
The Gallup Survey 399
West Watch 409
My Say: *Marilyn Ross* 410
Index to Advertisers 436
Weekly Exchange 438
Paperback Bestsellers ... 442
Hardcover Bestsellers ... 444

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NBCC Ethics Survey: Agreement, Disagreement and Ambiguity

The National Book Critics Circle, in a survey of the ethical beliefs of its 455 members, has documented significant differences in their professional practices. The survey, based on 126 completed questionnaires, was published in the January *NBCC Journal* and conducted by Carlin Romano, book editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

The responses, according to Romano's preface, express a split between members "who believe in something called the 'objective' review' " and those who favor expertise over any practice that "creates distance in the reviewing process between writer and reviewer." He also said another division exists between members who think both positive and negative reviews of books should be presented and those who think bad works, particularly bad fiction, should be ignored. But overall, in 19 out of the 29 questions, over 70% of the respondents were in agreement.

Romano observed that in spite of the many ethical ambiguities in the profession, many members dogmatically consider certain practices above question. "I was struck by how many times they wrote 'of course,' 'certainly,' 'How can you even ask?' . . . implying that book reviewing ethics are as plain as the Ten Commandments."

A selection of questions and comments follow.

Occasionally, a person who has already accepted a review assignment from one publication is asked to review the same book by a more prestigious or attractive publication. Should the person accept the second assignment without receiving permission from the first editor to withdraw from the existing assignment?

Yes: 9 (7.6%)
No: 107 (90.7%)
Not Sure: 2 (1.7%)
Comments:

1) "No, but let's be realistic . . ."

2) "What kind of money are we talking about here?"

3) "Not a good idea if you want to go to Reviewer Heaven."

'The Little Flatterer'

Is it ethical for a reviewer to decline to review a book he has already accepted for review, on the ground that he didn't like the book and doesn't want to say negative things in print?

Yes: 92 (75.4%)
No: 28 (23.0%)
Not Sure: 2 (1.6%)
Comments:

1) "If you want to be *á tout*, find another line of work."

2) "It isn't exactly ethical, but what can you do? Tie the little flatterer to his desk?"

Should authors who publish with a particular house be permitted to review other books published by that house?

Yes: 96 (76.8%)
No: 20 (16.0%)
Not Sure: 9 (7.2%)
Comments:

1) "Are writers really that craven, to make this an issue?"

2) "Yes—I have no loyalty to my publisher."

Shared Literary Agents

Should a writer be allowed to review the book of someone who shares the same literary agent?

Yes: 87 (70.7%)
No: 25 (20.3%)
Not Sure: 11 (9.0%)
Comments:

1) "Do book editors really know all these things? I'm impressed."

2) "Yes, and the same banker, and the same housekeeper."

Should an editor ever assign a book to a reviewer who is known to hold esthetic, political or literary principles contrary to those of the author?

Yes: 94 (76.4%)
No: 23 (18.7%)
Not Sure: 6 (4.9%)
Comments:

1) "Life would be awfully boring if only the uncommitted got to comment on books."

2) "If you answer no to this, book reviewing belongs to the history of advertising, not literary criticism."

Should an editor ever assign a book to a reviewer who is known to hold esthetic, political or literary views similar to the author's?

Yes: 108 (87.8%)
No: 9 (7.3%)
Not Sure: 6 (4.9%)
Comments:

1) "The editor must ask himself or herself these questions: Is the potential reviewer a jerk? Is the potential reviewer incapable of objectivity?"

2) "Oh, come on."

Selling Review Copies

Should book review editors be permitted to sell books they've decided not to review?

Yes: 55 (45.8%)
No: 58 (48.3%)
Not Sure: 7 (5.8%)
Comments:

1) "Never thought about it before, but it does sound sleazy."

2) "Probably not—it gives a monetary incentive to ignore or non-review a book."

Should freelance book reviewers be permitted to sell review copies?

Yes: 95 (78.5%)
No: 19 (15.7%)
Not Sure: 7 (5.8%)
Comments:

1) "Review copy is part of reviewer's pay. I've given them as Xmas presents!"

2) "Yes! The pay is so bad, it's often a hefty percentage of one's fee."

Is it ethical for a writer to both a) review a book and b) interview the author and write a feature about him?

Yes: 104 (83.2%)
No: 14 (11.2%)
Not Sure: 7 (5.6%)
Comments:

1) "Not a question of ethics here, but of monotony."

2) "I do this all the time, so I certainly hope so."

Is it ever ethical to review a book without reading the entire book?

Yes: 45 (36.3%)
No: 78 (62.9%)
Not Sure: 1 (0.8%)
Comments:

1) "You burn in Hell for that one."

2) "Absolutely despicable practice. Can you judge a good vinaigrette by tasting only the mustard?"

3) "There are certainly books so irredeemably bad that one can confidently reach a judgment without enduring every page."

Payment Nears for Women in Macmillan Sex-Bias Settlement

Ten years after a class action sex-discrimination suit was filed against Macmillan and two years after Macmillan agreed to a $1.9 million out-of-court consent decree, the women involved are receiving waivers that include notification of how much money each will receive under the agreement.

Because the waiver contains a nondisclosure clause, it is unknown how many women are affected and how much the payments are. The money is being distributed under a complicated formula assigning weights to various factors, like years of service and pay.

While Macmillan denies that it engaged in any sex discrimination, under the December 12, 1985, consent decree it agreed to provide a fund of $1,712,500 for women who had worked at the company for at least two years at any time since July 1973. Macmillan also agreed to a fund of $37,500 to be distributed to at least 15 women who were allegedly denied sales positions because of their sex. And the company agreed to an additional fund of $175,000 to be paid to the four women who originally brought the suit (News of the Week, Jan. 10, 1986).

THE GALLUP SURVEY

BY LEONARD WOOD

Book Buying Slightly Up in 1987

Gallup surveys in 1987 revealed that during any given week, 22% of American adults purchased a book. Although the increase over the past years is only slight (up 2% over 1986), this incidence of book buying is the highest observed since questioning began in 1983. The books bought were nearly evenly divided between fiction (41%) and nonfiction titles (42%), with the remainder consisting of textbooks or required reading (15%). The proportion of fiction was down slightly from 1986, while small increases were noted in nonfiction and textbook purchases. In fact, textbooks' share of the market was greater in 1987 than in any of the previous three years.

Historical nonfiction books rebounded in 1987 to account for 14% of the nonfiction market. A larger share of the fiction market was composed of children's books in 1987 (13%) than in 1986 (10%), but only small fluctuations were observed for other fiction categories (Table 1).

Nearly two-thirds of 1987's hardbacks cost more than $10, with the average hardcover price being $16.66, an increase of 8% over the 1986 average of $15.38. The price increase of paperbacks was somewhat less dramatic: the 1987 average price was $5.57, an increase of only 4% (Table 2). □

TABLE 1

TYPES OF FICTION/NONFICTION BOOKS PURCHASED IN 1987

Types of Fiction Books Purchased	Total Books 1984 %	1985 %	1986 %	1987 %	Change in % Points '86–'87
Mystery/Spy/ Suspense	18	16	17	17	0
Romance	16	16	16	15	-1
Popular Fiction	10	10	10	10	0
Action/Adventure/ War	13	13	10	11	+1
Science Fiction	10	10	10	9	-1
Children's	na	na	10	13	+3
Historical	12	15	8	9	+1
Western	4	3	5	3	-2
Humor	3	4	5	3	-2
Occult/Supernatural	4	2	3	5	+2
Other	7	8	2	3	+1
Don't know	3	3	4	3	-1
Total	100	100	100	100	

Types of Nonfiction Books Purchased	Total Books 1984 %	1985 %	1986 %	1987 %	Change in % Points '86–'87
Reference/ Instruction/ Computer	16	19	18	18	0
Autobiography/ Biography	14	14	17	15	-2
Historical	14	13	10	14	+4
Religious	9	11	10	9	-1
Home & Garden/ How-To	5	8	9	6	-3
Leisure	8	6	9	8	-1
Health/Diet/Exercise	7	7	6	9	+3
Cookbook	5	5	5	5	0
Children's	na	na	3	3	0
Investment/ Economics/Income Tax	4	4	3	3	0
Other	13	10	6	7	+1
Don't Know	5	3	4	3	-1
Total	100	100	100	100	

TABLE 2

PRICE PAID—ALL BOOKS PURCHASED

Price Paid	HARDBACK 1984 %	1985 %	1986 %	1987 %	Chg. in % Pts. '86–'87	PAPERBACK 1984 %	1985 %	1986 %	1987 %	Chg. in % Pts. '86–'87
$2.50 or less	6	5	6	8	+2	23	20	19	20	+1
$2.51–$3.95	4	3	4	3	-1	36	31	29	24	-5
$3.96–$6.00	8	8	9	6	-3	21	26	29	30	+1
$6.01–$10.00	21	18	16	16	0	11	13	13	14	+1
$10.01–$15.00	26	28	26	22	-4	5	5	5	6	+1
More than $15.00	32	37	37	42	+5	2	3	3	4	+1
Don't remember	3	1	2	3	+1	2	2	2	2	0
Total	100	100	100	100		100	100	100	100	
Mean Average	$14.62	$15.18	$15.38	$16.66		$4.76	$5.12	$5.36	$5.57	

NOTE: *Results are based on 10,180 telephone interviews conducted among a nationally representative sample of adults, age 18 and older, from January-December 1987.*